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EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

Master's Thesis

THE STORM OF ISAIAH IN JOHN ADAMS'S *EL NIÑO*

BY

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I am grateful to my friend Christine Howe for drawing my attention to *El Niño*. She attended a performance by the Boston Symphony in December 2006, just at the time that I was thinking about a thesis topic related to Isaiah texts used during Advent. She was so enthusiastic that I was intrigued and wanted to find out more. Although I have enjoyed becoming acquainted with *El Niño* through the medium of compact disk, I hope to have the opportunity to attend a live performance myself one day.

Introduction

In December 2000, John Adams's nativity oratorio *El Niño* premiered in Paris.

Adams had collaborated with producer/director Peter Sellars to create more than a typical non-staged oratorio (such as Handel's *Messiah*). The work is "a three-tiered spectacle of acting singers (including the chorus), of dancers, and of a film."¹ All aspects of the performance contribute impressions and add a complex subtlety to the plot.² Those of us who come to the work through the medium of compact disk lose the richness inherent in a live performance of this unique work, but as is so often the case, our limited visual sense heightens our ability to focus on the music and text alone.

Adams has put together a text rich in sources: poetry, sermons, the Bible, deuterocanonical texts and mystery plays.

Adams had ...always wanted to write a work about birth, and while *El Niño* is about a specific birth, its subject is larger: the inexhaustible miracle of birth...The first task was choosing or assembling a text. Adams never intended to offer a straight Biblical narrative; rather, he imagined from the beginning that he would follow...a plan that interlards a basic narration with commentary from other sources. Something else Adams knew early on was that he wanted women's voices clearly heard in a work whose subject was birth: 'How can you tell this story in the year 2000 and not have a woman's voice?'³

He found such expressions in some poems by Hispanic women. Thus the central narrative that is so generally well-known is embellished with a rich tapestry of voices not usually applied to this particular story.

Those already familiar with the story of the nativity of Jesus are not surprised to find

¹ Michael Steinberg, "A Nativity for a New Century," Liner notes for *El Niño: A Nativity Oratorio* by John Adams, Nonesuch, 2002, 12.

² It is important to note that a performance of *El Niño* involves an orchestra, with acting singers behind them on a stage, and a film playing at the same time on the wall behind the singers. It is very difficult for the audience to take in all there is to see and hear.

³ Steinberg, "Nativity," 15-16.

verses from Isaiah woven into the story line. We have come to expect them. “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse...” (Isa 11:1) and “a virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son...” (Isa 7:10) are only two of many Isaiah texts that are integral to a Christian’s understanding of the biblical context for Jesus’ birth. Assembling texts from a variety of sources to tell the story through multiple lenses, Adams chose seven verses from five chapters in Isaiah to use in his telling. None of these verses is from a passage normally associated with the traditional foretelling of the nativity story.

Why use Isaiah texts at all? Why step out of the box of Old Testament prophetic texts, but keep one foot in the box by playing with the Advent images that the book of Isaiah evokes? The writings of Isaiah were offered first to the Israelites and have come into our century with many layers. In the same way that multiple lighting gels affect our view of theatre scenes, the layers combine to color our interpretation of Isaiah, including its promise of rest and hope. Many composers have chosen to work with texts from Isaiah because the book contains “words that express the presence and call of God, dire human despair, God’s righteous indignation, and the hope and comfort of humanity in God’s presence.”⁴

With a primary focus on the Isaiah texts from the libretto of Adams’s musical work, this thesis will document how the texts are used to tell the story of the nativity. Each of the Isaiah verses will be examined in turn, beginning with a text-critical exploration of meaning in their original context. The verses will be presented in the order that they occur in the libretto, rather than in the order that they appear in the book of Isaiah. Taking them in libretto order will show more clearly how Adams used the verses to tell the story his way. For each verse, the original intent of the ancient writer will be explored first, along with

⁴ Paul Westermeyer, “Exegesis of Isaiah in Choral Music,” *Word & World* 19 no 2: 173.

exegesis of the surrounding material that will help us understand how the verses were heard in their author's day, hundreds of years before Jesus was born, and in what way they were understood as prophetic texts.

Further analysis in each chapter will examine what impact the Isaiah verses have on this particular story. Has Adams changed the function or meaning of the scripture in order to illuminate his particular slant? Another important question is whether the Isaiah texts further Adams's goal of telling the nativity story in a different and convincing way. Because the libretto is a collection from many sources, even the decisions about the sequence of texts have a considerable influence on how we hear the story. Within this experimental libretto, Adams has juxtaposed serious, contemporary poetry with very ancient texts. The result is a story that is old, yet new.

The discoveries from probing these and other questions include how the familiar birth story is opened up by being told through unfamiliar texts. In addition, the use of the Isaiah verses in this new context allows a fresh hearing of those words as well. Both serve the larger purpose of a renewed understanding of the biblical texts that are more usually associated with the telling of the nativity story, from both the Old and the New Testaments, some of which are also included in *El Niño*.

By embedding the texts within a musical composition, Adams provides us with yet another layer of enhancement and interpretation. While the main focus of this thesis is the Isaiah texts themselves, their fullness within the rich context of *El Niño* will also be explored.

This thesis refers to God in a variety of ways. All quotations retain each author's particular language for God.

The thesis is organized in the following way:

1) Each chapter's title includes the location of the Isaiah verse under consideration within the greater work of *El Niño*, which is in two parts. The identifying designation will be Part One or Two, the number (#) of the song within the Part and the title of the song that contains the Isaiah verse(s). For the reader's further orientation, the complete list of song titles in *El Niño* can be found in Appendix A (p. 51).

2) Following the locating information, the entire text of the song, including text references, will be given. The Bible translation used by Adams is the King James Version.

3) Under the song text that includes Isaiah material, the Isaiah text to be considered in that chapter, from the New Revised Standard translation, will be given.

4) Exegesis of each Isaiah text will begin within its biblical context.

5) Exegesis of the Isaiah text within its oratorio context will follow.

The final chapter, Chapter 6, will summarize how the intentional use of Hispanic women's voices affects the storytelling, making explicit some general conclusions that have been suggested throughout. We will also see that it is more than the use of texts written by women that gives *El Niño* a feminist voice. The more usual rendering of Mary as an idealized character and Joseph as a very good man is a subtle but real way that we come under the influence of a patriarchal text. We will see how Adams's creative adaptations and juxtapositions of texts from a variety of sources lead us to identify less with Joseph and more with Mary. This more balanced portrayal of characters in *El Niño*, with the added layer of evocative music, subtly leads our empathies toward Mary, which we discover is a way to tell the story from a woman's perspective.

Isaiah Texts in *El Niño*

As noted in the Introduction, each chapter begins with the song text from *El Niño* that includes the Isaiah verse to be analyzed in the chapter. The Isaiah portion of the lyrics is in italics for ease of identification. Biblical exegesis forms the first and largest section of each chapter, followed by discussion of the Isaiah quote in its musical context, as adapted by Adams.

Chapter 1: Isaiah 14:3 in Part One #8 “Joseph’s Dream”

Then Joseph feared greatly and stopped talking with her,
considering what he would do.

Night came upon him:
behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying:

Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee
Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

Journey forth with her and be despised at the inns
and stopping places on the way,
even though you are worthy to ride in state
in a chariot of gold.

The large houses and costly apartments will remain empty,
but this comfort will remain hidden to you.
Let Mary labor and give birth among the animals and beasts of burden
on a cold night, in a strange land and in a poor resting place.

*And it shall come to pass that He
shall give thee rest from thy sorrow,
and from thy fear, and from the hard bondage
wherein thou was made to serve.*

--Gospel of James; Matthew 1; Martin Luther’s Christmas Sermon; Isaiah 14:3

Isaiah 14:3--When the Lord has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, NRSV

Generally, Isaiah 1-39 is understood as the pre-exilic writing of Isaiah of Jerusalem, who held a place in the royal court and who died, it is thought, c. 680-640 BCE. The pain, turmoil and hard service to the king of Babylon, mentioned in 14:3, seems more like an exilic reference, which would place the writing some time after 586 BCE, the date of the fall of Jerusalem. I agree with Brevard Childs’ assessment that the theme here in 14:1-4a is

restoration and “has been shaped by the exilic period.”⁵ Inserted at this point in the book, however, it reminds the readers of Assyria and its conquest of the northern kingdom (721 BCE), even though the text says Babylon. Whether Assyria or Babylon, the oracle “asserts YHWH’s rule and thereby offers hope for Israel that the God who loves Israel is the God who will judge all barbarian nations, including especially those who abuse Israel.”⁶

Another piece of this oracle’s hope is the reassertion (14:1) of God’s promise to make of Israel a chosen people. This promise was first recorded in Ex 19:6, where it is said to have been given about three months after the Hebrew people had fled from Egypt (Ex 19:1). Without trying to date the exodus, it is sufficient to say that the promise had been made and cherished by this people for hundreds of years.⁷

Isaiah 14 is an oracle located in a group of oracles against “the nations.” These nations include the contiguous people who lived in the lands surrounding Jerusalem. Those specifically named include some cities and some regions.⁸ The verse chosen for the first statement from Isaiah in *El Niño* comes from the center of an oracle against Babylon. It is the first oracle of the larger group and is the opening salvo in a section that stands in contrast to the opening chapters of the book (Isaiah 1-5), which are oracles against God’s own people. The tone of the Babylon oracle is mocking (14:4 calls the verses which follow a “taunt”), but for the Israelites, the tone is one of hope. Herein lies an unusual aspect of these

⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 123.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 164.

⁷ Paul Lawrence, *The IVP Atlas of Bible History* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 36-37 for a brief discussion of two theories for specifically dating the exodus at either 1447 BCE or 1270 BCE.

⁸ Those named are Babylon in Assyria (13:1-14:23, 21:1-10), Assyria (14:24-27), Philistia (or Gaza 14:28-32), Moab (15:1-16:14, 25:10-12), Damascus in Syria (17:1-14), Ethiopia (18:1-17), Egypt (19:1-25), Dumah in Arabia (21:11-12), Arabia (21:13-17), and Tyre in Syria (23:1-18).

oracles—they are clearly directed at Israel, even while being about other named places. They are intended to influence Israel—emotionally, spiritually, communally—rather than the named subjects. “The phrasing of the poetry intends not simply to state a verdict on the tyrant, but to make that verdict emotively available to the listening community of staggered, hope-filled Jews.”⁹

The unit of 14:1-4 is a narrative connector between two poetically written oracles. The first (Isa 13:1-22) is against Babylon the place, the second (Isa 14:5-23) is against Babylon’s ruler. Childs notes a further contrast between the two poetic passages—the first “speaks of Babylon’s coming destruction in eschatological terms, while the second takes up an ancient taunt song to celebrate the fall of its arrogant ruler.”¹⁰ The first oracle is full of symbolic language and images of the end times: “the day of the Lord” in v. 9 and many uses of the words “will be,” all pointing toward the future. Another image in this eschatological section is that “the earth will be shaken” (13:13). This same image is repeated in Hag 2:6-7, a text that follows 14:3 in *El Niño* and which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In most translations, Isa 14:3 is a subordinate clause completed in verse 4. This includes the King James Version, from which the biblical texts in *El Niño* are taken. Adams however has turned verse 3 into a complete sentence for his purposes by removing three words: “in the day.” The removal of those few words changes the sentence from a specifically contingent sentence to a declarative sentence. In their biblical context, Isa 14:3-4 say “when God does X for you (v. 3), you will do Y (v. 4).” Adams’s version goes further and says “God *will* do X for you.” These are very different understandings, and, dare I say

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 125.

¹⁰ Childs, *Isaiah*, 125.

uses, of the verse. It is interesting that the libretto text does not note that this is an adaptation, as was mentioned in the Liner Notes in regard to an Infancy Gospel of James text used in the previous piece.

The promise and hope of 14:3 is in the word “rest.” The biblical concept of rest is multi-dimensional, meaning more than lack of exertion. Generally, “the Old Testament concept of ‘rest’ is bound up with ‘land, inheritance, possession, safety from surrounding enemies’ (Deut 12:9-10; 25:19).”¹¹ Rest is more than absence of labor. The OT concept also holds the idea of comfort (lack of stresses). It includes peace of mind (lack of fear), prosperity, progeny—being taken care of now and into the future. “Judah in exile, away from its homeland, could not find rest...A widow has no ‘rest’ until she gets married again.”¹² The ultimate fulfillment of rest is the hope of righteousness, joy and the presence of God. Beyond mere presence, rest implies a relationship between God and God’s chosen people; a relationship where God will provide all that the people need.¹³

The context of the Isaiah 14 oracle is a carrying forward of the idea of rest from its Exodus/gaining-of-the-Promised-Land roots to a keeping-of-the-Promised-Land hope. The people of Judah were living in fear in Isaiah’s time. They had already seen the northern kingdom lose itself to Assyria. For those tribes, losing their geographic homes in the Promised Land was the immediately painful part; knowing that their land was being religiously defiled by “others” was also a humiliation. The dispersion of the northern tribes and the importation of Syrians, Babylonians and others would also have been devastating for

¹¹ Xuan Huong Thi Pham, *Mourning in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 302 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 63.

¹² Thi Pham, *Mourning*, 63.

¹³ See Psalm 132, which is an extended commentary on the rich biblical meaning of rest.

the southern kingdom to witness. It made the encroaching and very strong political powers around the remaining tribes extremely intimidating. On one hand, there were God's promises; on the other hand, there were also political realities.

When the Isaiah 14 oracle was written, a time of unsettlement and eventual exile, God's promise to make Israel a chosen people may have seemed like a broken promise and vain hope. Yet part of receiving a promise of God is always to trust, even when there is overwhelming physical evidence to the contrary: the nation of Assyria is massing at the gates, yet the Israelites are God's chosen people. As either a complete sentence or a subordinate clause, Isa 14:3 is written in the past tense. In other words, the "rest" of verse 3 has to be in place before the taunt against Babylon can be taken up. That assumes the fulfillment of God's promises. Trust in God trumps evidence.

Adams has brought the themes of rest and hope from Isa 14:3 into *El Niño* to illuminate Joseph's story. He includes the theme of trust amidst a doubtful situation. God's people in any stage of history have been asked to suspend disbelief and to trust instead. This was never truer than it was for Joseph. The baby to be born was both the source and the culmination of the rest yearned for by the children of Israel and promised by the prophet Isaiah. Jesus fulfilled "presence" and, with the birth of this child, the future rest was assured. Isa 14:3 is part of the angel's speech to Joseph in Part One #8, "Joseph's Dream."

But first, Adams has set up "Joseph's Dream" with a scene of tension/conflict between Joseph and Mary in #7, "Now She Was Sixteen Years Old" [see Appendix B for text], using text adapted from the Infancy Gospel of James (hereinafter called Infancy James). Adams has also taken liberties by adapting Infancy James in this and "Joseph's

Dream” that affect how we hear the material from the other sources. These changes cause the ancient patriarchal texts to speak this time with a woman’s voice. Like some other apocryphal Gospels, the “hidden purpose [of Infancy James] was to intensify the value of Mary’s virginity. Therefore Joseph was transmogrified into an old gentleman who was suitable as a protector for a Mary who vowed herself to virginity from girlhood.”¹⁴ “Now She Was Sixteen Years Old” lays some story background and is the first appearance of Joseph in preparation for “Joseph’s Dream.”

Adams tells the story as much with the music as with the texts. “Now She” is sharp, dissonant and conversational in style. There is cross-singing between the Mary and Joseph soloists in the manner of a true dialogue of dispute. The underlying orchestral music sounds ominous. The dissonant harmonies sung by the three counter-tenors keep the emotional level high and strained. The melody sung by the baritone (Joseph) is strong, emphasizing the “who” and especially the “why.” The two-note *leitmotiv* for the name “Mary” is emotionally charged with both anger and pathos.

The Infancy James account, adapted as the text for “Now She,” has many references to God, most of which have been removed by Adams. In the story as told in Infancy James, Joseph is primarily Mary’s protector. He objects to being the one chosen by lot to take her to his home, but the high priest threatens that a catastrophe might happen to Joseph and his family if he does not accept his lot. “And so out of fear Joseph took her into his care and

¹⁴ Martin L. Smith, SSJE, “Abba Father,” in *Nativity & Passions* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1995), 19.

protection” (Infancy James 9:11).¹⁵ Joseph is concerned about the consequences and the effect on their individual relationships to God.

By removing all but one such reference to God, Adams heightens the quarrel between Joseph and Mary. The conflict of “Now She” plays out on the human plane only. The audience has been previously prepared by the first six songs to understand that Mary has a profound, deep relationship to God; that she is pure; that she has seen angels. In these first six pieces, the audience has been privy to Mary’s story on a fairly intimate level. We have no such information about Joseph. By shaping the material from Infancy James to leave out the references to God from Joseph’s speech, the *El Niño* audience has no basis to understand that Joseph is thinking on any other level than a human point of view. Mary has the godly view; Joseph has the human/macho view. What a different picture is presented between the behavior and attitude of the man (Joseph) and that of the two women (Mary and Elizabeth) in the Gospel accounts, especially Luke and Infancy James. The Gospel writers describe the women with respect and esteem and even portray them as ideals, while Joseph is portrayed as being a good man, but very human.

As the story unfolds in Infancy James, in the part summarized and adapted by Adams in “Now She,” Joseph brings Mary home and, believing that he has done the right thing and that the Lord will protect her, Joseph goes back to his building trade some distance away. When he returns months later to find her six months pregnant, “he struck his face and threw himself to the ground” and wept bitterly *because he had failed to protect her*¹⁶ (Infancy James 13:3). His concerns are first: his and Mary’s relationship to God; second: who

¹⁵ Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa, California: Polebridge Press, 1995), 49.

¹⁶ The words in italics in this paragraph are in Infancy James, but are left out of *El Niño*. Their absence causes the audience to see Joseph as more self-involved than he is portrayed in Infancy James.

has entrapped him (remembering the serpent and Adam, how the serpent entrapped Eve when Adam was away praying, 13:5); third: how could Mary have done this *against the Lord*, given her up-bringing in the Temple. (Mary's reply, "I do not know whence it came to me" is quoted accurately and without change from Infancy James.¹⁷ It is an interesting denial in that Mary had been visited by an angel/messenger, and while she could have told Joseph what the angel had said as a way to justify her predicament, she does not mention it. Later, Joseph receives a visit from "a messenger of the Lord" and says nothing to Mary about that. Each fails to tell the other about these most crucial events. Curious.)

By leaving out sections of Infancy James, thereby juxtaposing texts that are not together in the original, *El Niño* presents Joseph's reaction as primarily anger at Mary. "Reacting in anger and suspicion, not believing her protestations, he can think only like a macho male: What matters is how bad this makes him look."¹⁸ Thus Joseph receives the angel in his dream against a backdrop of fitful, angry sleep. Infancy James presents an admirable view of the cause of Joseph's restlessness, as if that author wants the reader to understand that Joseph felt responsible for Mary's predicament because he had left her alone. We further understand that Joseph had a protector's concern for Mary, one who is experiencing worry rather than anger about the truth of her story.

In *El Niño*, Joseph's anger is suffused with fear, which only increases as Mary talks about God. "Joseph's Dream" begins with "Then Joseph feared greatly." The *El Niño* audience's only backdrop for this sentence is Joseph and Mary's dispute in "Now She." Joseph can see that Mary is pregnant, yet she says she has not had sex with any man. In

¹⁷ Infancy James 13:10

¹⁸ Steinberg, "Nativity," 22.

“Joseph’s Dream,” the audience becomes privy to Joseph’s internal struggle as he tries to reconcile what he has heard with what he can see and with what he feels. The essential message for Joseph in *El Niño* is that, even though he finds himself in a difficult circumstance, God is ultimately in control and the coming event is momentous. Trust trumps evidence. The event will be earth-shaking, although not in a literal sense. And here we return to the multi-dimensional concept of rest: the child will bring to fullness the ultimate rest, which the people have been promised for hundreds of years.

Adams will emphasize this “earth-shaking” imagery by using verses from Haggai 2 in the piece that follows “Joseph’s Dream.” The same text was also used by Georg Frederick Handel in *Messiah*, put together there with Mal 3:1 to emphasize the enormity of Christ’s impending birth. The connection to *Messiah* is important to note because Adams loves that work¹⁹ and has written Song #9 “Shake the Heavens” in Handelian style, both musically and textually. Adams has combined the Haggai text (2:6-7, 9), [mistakenly written in the Liner Notes as Haggai 6-7; 9] with verses from Infancy James, again to emphasize that Jesus’ birth was irregular. The juxtaposition of the two texts causes the predictive statement “the desire of the nations shall come” (Hag 2:7) to take on Messianic overtones. (to compare, see Appendix C for Handel’s and Adams’s texts.)

Of course, neither Adams nor Handel was the first to make that connection. Verse 6 of the familiar Advent hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” begins with “O come, desire of nations, come...” “Each of the Antiphons salutes the coming Messiah under one of the many titles ascribed to him in Holy Scripture, and closes with a petition based

¹⁹ Steinberg, “Nativity,” 14.

upon the salutation.”²⁰ These antiphons used during Advent, the so-called “O” Antiphons, seem to have been known quite early. The ease with which we turn the Haggai text into a Messianic prediction is an ironic example of how repetition can mold and shape our thought process. Many of us have heard the Haggai/Malachi juxtaposition so many times in *Messiah* that it is easy to forget that they are two distinct texts. It is a good lesson in how concept-reversals, such as we will see in Isaiah 5, are possible (see Chapter 2). We can too easily convince ourselves that truth is fiction and vice versa.

Returning to “Joseph’s Dream,” the three sentences quoted from Martin Luther’s Christmas sermon here have also been manipulated in the *El Niño* text to focus on Joseph rather than on Mary. In Martin Luther’s original: “imagine how she was despised at the inns and stopping places on the way, although worthy to ride in state in a chariot of gold”²¹ (see Appendix D for the full section). But the rights of the man and *his* qualifications for excellent treatment are in the foreground in *El Niño*: “Journey forth with her...even though you are worthy to ride in state in a chariot of gold.” The next sentence in the *El Niño* text contains a parallel “you”: “...but this comfort will remain hidden to you.” Since the word “you” is ambiguous in English and can be either a singular or a plural, it is possible to interpret “you” as a plural in *El Niño*, applying the worthiness to both Mary and Joseph, and

²⁰ “[The Antiphons] appear to be of non-Roman origin, but were introduced into the Roman liturgy prior to the ninth century. Cabaniss in *Speculum*, XXII (1947), 440-2, quotes a passage from the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, III, 12 by Boethius (d.525) which suggests that they may have been familiar to the latter.” Joint Commission on the Revision of the Hymnal of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, *The Hymnal 1940 Companion*, 3rd Revised Edition (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1951), 1-2.

²¹ Martin Luther, “The Story of the Birth of Jesus; and the Angels’ Song,” A Sermon for Christmas Day, 1522. *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2000), 138.
http://www.trinitylutheranms.org/MartinLuther/MLSermons/Luke2_1_14.html (accessed January 13, 2008).

Luther's sermon text does clearly apply to both: "this comfort and treasure are hidden from them."²² The angel is speaking to Joseph alone, though, so the singular is more likely here.

Adams has changed the subject of Luther's sentences from Mary to Joseph in order to emphasize the suffering of Joseph in this betrothal/pregnancy situation. Adams also heightens the tension of the story by giving the audience this additional window into Joseph's character and personality.

Isaiah is the last of the four sources that make up the text of "Joseph's Dream." In both the KJV and NRSV, Isa 14:3 says "the Lord will give you rest." Adams has changed "the Lord" to "He," opening up the reference to interpretation. The implication in the *El Niño* context is that "He" is the child to be born "among the animals and beasts of burden on a cold night, in a strange land and in a poor resting place" (the immediately preceding sentence). Without clearly identifying "He" as the child yet to be born, Adams makes assumptions about the prior knowledge of the audience. He has linked Jesus with the God of Isaiah by using prophetic Old Testament material, thereby hinting at Jesus' divinity. Also, by using a capital H, if the reference is to the child, Adams is implying divinity through the written text, although the subtlety would be invisible aurally.

Who, then, is to receive rest from their sorrow? "Thee," whoever is being supplied with rest, could be a collective pronoun including both Joseph and Mary, and the language of sorrow, fear and hard bondage could apply to both or either of them. For Mary's part, her sorrow could be her confusing pregnancy; her fear of Joseph's reaction, of public shame, of having seen a vision, of the unknown. The hard bondage hints at the same difficulty that Simeon spoke about to Mary at the temple in Lk 2:34-35: "This child is destined for the

²² Luther, "Christmas Sermon," 138.

falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” As tempting as it is to bring Mary back into the story at this point, the singular “thee” seems more likely. The detailed changes made to the other sources in the text of “Joseph’s Dream” must have been made intentionally by Adams to draw our attention to Joseph and away from Mary. For Joseph to be the consistent focus of the whole song makes more sense and I think that “you” and “thee” are singular and refer only to Joseph.

Joseph’s sorrow, then, is that Mary is pregnant but not with his child. The shame and public humiliation, for both Mary and Joseph, would have been almost unbearable. Whether we believe the biblical Gospel implication that Joseph was a young man of marriageable age, or whether we believe Infancy James’ description of Joseph as an elderly widower with sons of his own (9:8),²³ Joseph was a man who had to provide for himself and his family through his trade. Joseph’s sorrow could include his own failure to protect Mary and the reality of this major wrinkle in what should be a joyous moment in Joseph’s life. The mention of Joseph’s hard bondage acknowledges that this part of his life’s journey was not going to be easy for him and, if we can believe tradition, he died before Jesus became fully grown. Within the plotline of *El Niño*, Joseph’s sorrow is un-nuanced anger and feelings of betrayal, tempered by the message from the angel. As a man, his rights had been unforgivably violated. As a God-fearer, his anger was diffused by the angel’s message, becoming the question that we all ask when life is hard—“Why?”

The human plane of Joseph’s thought opens up several concrete issues that may be part of Joseph’s struggle. In the most basic terms, a wife in early CE was considered to be

²³ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels*, 49.

part of a man's property. As a possession, she had no legal rights of her own. Her duty was to serve her husband and provide him with a son, an heir to insure her husband's rest in perpetuity. A wife who becomes "mysteriously" pregnant appears to be defying her husband and his rights to her; another man has presumably usurped Joseph's place and stolen his wife and his rest.

The connection between Isaiah 14 and the story of *El Niño* may seem distant and roundabout, but nonetheless the use of Isa 14:3 in "Joseph's Dream" serves to highlight the subjects of freedom and rest. Adams's use of the verse as a declarative statement puts the emphasis on the reliability of God's promise and away from a tenuous outcome based on uncertain human behavior. "The promise of 14:1-2 and indeed the very structure of the book of Isaiah anticipates a time when Judah will be relieved of all of the abusive pressures of exile, a relief made possible by Yahweh's 'Day' when the exploitative overlord will lose control."²⁴ It is as if the history of Israel is a metaphor for the world in its relationship to God. Israel's need of rescue from exile in Babylon is the same as the world's need of rescue from sin and death. It is no wonder that the writers of biblical apocalyptic material focus on an enemy named "Babylon" as the ultimate oppressor.²⁵

²⁴ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, 125.

²⁵ See especially the references to Babylon in Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation.

Chapter 2: Isaiah 5:20-21 in Part Two: #3 “Woe Unto Them That Call Evil Good”

Note: Because this entire song is made up of Isaiah texts, the analysis of all three texts within *El Niño* will be taken up primarily in Chapter 4.

*Woe unto them that call evil good,
and good evil; that put darkness for light,
and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!*

*Woe unto them that are wise
in their own eyes, and prudent in
their own sight!*

Woe unto them that seek deep
to hide their counsel from the Lord,
and their works are in the dark,
and they say, Who seeth us?
and who knoweth us?

I also will choose their delusions,
and will bring their fears upon them.

--Isaiah 5:20-21; Isaiah 29:15; Isaiah 66:4a

Isaiah 5:20-21 Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight! NRSV

The first five chapters of Isaiah set the stage for the book. The scene in Isaiah 6, the call of Isaiah as a prophet, would not have taken place if God had not needed a prophet to proclaim judgment on God's people Israel and on the nations surrounding them. As Isaiah begins this background information, he uses several different geographical/family names with changing meaning, so it is important to be aware of the context. Sometimes Israel, including Jerusalem, means all twelve tribes (1:3). Sometimes Israel means just the northern kingdom (14:1).²⁶ Zion means Jerusalem (1:8). Judah means the southern kingdom whose capital is Jerusalem/Zion (1:1). House of Jacob could mean the northern kingdom (2:5) or

²⁶ J. M. M. Roberts, “Isaiah” notes in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, ed. Wayne A. Meeks (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 1014.

all twelve tribes, i.e. all of Jacob's sons. The ambiguity adds richness to the text, widening the possibilities of the references.

The words of Isaiah 1-5 go back and forth between Israel's behavior that justifies God's judgment and what the land will be like "on that day," the day in the future when judgment will have produced obedience and God will be glorified. Isa 1:2 states the problem clearly: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me." As if he were writing a legal brief, Isaiah lays out the specific evidence against Israel with focus on the special connection between justice and righteousness, with justice holding the first position in each case (Isa 1:21, 26, 27; 5:7, 16). The prophet rails against injustice, citing example after example from all of Israel—the northern tribes, the southern tribes, and Jerusalem singled out as "the mountain of the Lord" (2:3).

A pattern where God produces evidence that justifies punishment of Israel occurs with some regularity in Isaiah and other pre-exilic prophets. It was first identified as a particular form by Hermann Gunkel as *Gerichtssrede*, or lawsuit speech.²⁷ Scholars are not in agreement on the use of the term "lawsuit." Michael De Roche argues that, used in its modern sense, it is somewhat misleading to apply the term "lawsuit" to passages where God is merely making an accusation. In an accusation, there are only two parties involved, as here: Israel as accused and God as accuser. But there are usually three parties involved in a legal lawsuit proceeding: the defendant, the plaintiff and the judge. "Lawsuit" is not a term that describes an accusation, but implies a particular process by which the accusation is

²⁷ See Kirsten Nielsen, "Yahweh as Prosecutor and Judge: An Investigation of the Prophetic Lawsuit (*riḇ* - Pattern)," Frederick Cryer, translator, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 9* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1978.) 5-6.

resolved.”²⁸ Two people can be in dispute and find resolution in any number of ways, but it is only when the parties take an issue to court that the matter becomes a lawsuit. Other scholars argue that the Hebrew word *rîb*, often translated as “lawsuit,” in reality, refers not to the process but to the bilateral dispute itself.²⁹ “The difference between a *rîb* and a lawsuit is that a *rîb* is a contention, while a lawsuit is a particular way of solving a contention.”³⁰ In this view, the dispute between Joseph and Mary in “Now She” can be correctly termed a *rîb*.

William A. VanGemenen argues that there *are* three parties in these oracles: Israel as defendant, God as judge, and the prophet as God’s prosecutor. In addition, VanGemenen includes the “woe oracles” as a form within the lawsuit genre.³¹ As such, Isa 5:20 and 21, used in *El Niño*, are part of the announcement of woe that names the accused. “Woe sayings do not necessarily require the inclusion of a threat or judgment, since the pronouncement of a woe may already include that within itself.”³²

Isaiah 4 ends with an image from the Exodus story, describing the abiding presence of God in Jerusalem with the same language used to describe God’s presence with the people in the wilderness (Ex. 13:21-22) and with Moses on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:9, 16-18). The cloud and fire served as symbols on several levels; their physical manifestation provided an encouragement to the people. Cloud and fire were physical barriers that the people *could* see and symbolized the presence of the God that the people *could not* see. The cloud and fire also

²⁸ Michael De Roche, “Yahweh’s *Rîb* Against Israel: A Reassessment of the So-Called ‘Prophetic Lawsuit’ in the Preexilic Prophets,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102/4 (1983): 564.

²⁹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), s.v. lawsuit, 93.

³⁰ De Roche, *Rîb*, 569.

³¹ William A. VanGemenen, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), 400.

³² H.G.M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27*, vol. 1, *Commentary on Isaiah 1-5* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 384.

provided hope because the surety of these concrete, earthly elements as the fulfillment of God's promise meant that they could also believe what else was being said to them by God through Moses. So cloud and fire continued long after the Exodus to function as rich symbols for God's presence with the people, protection from enemies and hope for the future.

Isaiah 5 begins with the "Love-Song to the Vineyard," God's own song for Israel. Isa 5:7 is the key verse that explains both who the vineyard is and what went wrong. The vineyard, which proves to be such a disappointment, "is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting." The problem is that God expected justice and righteousness. God had hoped to pass along the best divine qualities to God's own children. Instead God "saw bloodshed" and "heard a cry." The people have fallen short and justice is demanded. In this example of the lawsuit trilateral genre, "Isaiah 5:1-7 uses judicial imagery to construct an allegory...In vv 3-4 the people of Judah are asked to judge (*šipṭū*) between the planter and the vineyard. Before receiving the sentence, however, Yahweh decides to plow the vines under. Verse 7 reveals that the vineyard is really Judah and that she has inadvertently passed sentence on herself."³³

The remaining seventeen verses of Isaiah 5 (vv. 8-25), including vv. 20-21, under consideration here, lay out a series of "woes" that are the result of Israel's disobedience and rejection of God. The woes are punctuated with verses beginning with "therefore" (vv. 13, 14, 24, 25), i.e. you are denounced, therefore X will happen to you. This section of chapter 5 contains many contrasting dualities. Some are opposites, some illustrate imbalance, some are virtual oxymorons: alone in the midst (v. 8), evil/good, darkness/light, bitter/sweet (v. 20),

³³ De Roche, *Rib*, 571.

acquit the guilty/deprive the innocent (v. 23). The climax is stated in v. 25 as an impossible-to-believe consequence: “Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people...” How could that be? The preceding seventeen verses have in fact spelled out, step by step, how the behavior of God’s own people has aroused God’s anger against them.

The verse that is the climax of this section’s themes of justice and righteousness is Isa 5:16. But Adams has chosen two later verses (vv. 20-21) to use as the opening of Part Two, Song #3, “Woe Unto Them That Call Evil Good.” Removed from their Isaiah context, the verses lose the impact of the careful build-up of evidence: in particular, the multiple examples of duality that have been building up since v. 8. With vv. 20-21 presented on their own, the *El Niño* reader/audience has no choice but to take them at face value.

Isa 5:20 states three very clear opposites and Isa 5:21 further clarifies the behavior that justifies and deserves judgment. In the lawsuit genre, they are verses that identify the defendants. In v. 20, there can be no mistaking the first of each pair for the second. Isaiah unambiguously states that the error *is* being made by God’s own people. The danger of consequences is apparent.

To the Israelite, what a person thinks up, and then says, and then does, are all part of the same experience. Plans, and words, and actions are all aspects of the same homogenized, personal expression... In our culture we speak of idle words, but for the Israelites words have power. People need to say what they mean. Isaiah denounced those who say “bitter” when they mean “sweet” (5:20) or perhaps even begin to believe that “bitter” is “sweet.”³⁴

Despite the poetic language, we can understand that good, light and sweet are desirable and God-like. By the same token, evil, darkness and bitter are undesirable and those who blatantly desire them are the antithesis of God-like. Isa 5:21 makes it clear that it is human

³⁴ William L. Holladay, *Unbound by Time: Isaiah Still Speaks* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 2002), 28.

wisdom that motivates and justifies the unrighteous, resulting ultimately in the anger of the Lord against God's people (v. 25). The less visible consequence is that the hearts of the people are transformed from hearts of flesh to hearts of stone, the opposite of the transformation that God wants for God's people in any age (Ezek 11:19-20). Once again, the power of negative suggestion, especially repetitive suggestion, causes us to lose our way gradually and carries the potential for great danger to our souls.

A. S. Herbert links the error that Isaiah is denouncing more directly with religion and the influence of the polytheism of Canaan. Israel lost its moral compass when it turned away from God, but "is without excuse, for she has received the light to guide her in the way, and the divine instruction that is sweeter than honey (Ps 19:8-10)".³⁵ This is not a blurring of morals or making excuses. Isaiah likens this error to full denial and turning one's back on God (see Isa 5:24 "...for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts...").

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a conservative English theologian, goes so far as to call this

perversion. For to be perverted is to be worse than to be amoral. To be non-moral is at any rate to be negative, but these have gone beyond amorality to a position in which they reverse morality and put evil for good, and good for evil; darkness for light, and light for darkness; bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter. This is a condition in which they have overturned all the standards. It is a deliberate, positive reversal of what hitherto has been more or less universally accepted.³⁶

Lloyd-Jones's emphasis is on the willfulness of the action. Isaiah is not denouncing Israel because they have become estranged from God against their will. They themselves chose the direction of their own negative transformation.

³⁵ A. S. Herbert, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary, Isaiah 1-39*, Ackroyd, P.R., A.R.C. Leaney, J.W. Packer, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 53.

³⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *A Nation Under Wrath: Studies in Isaiah 5* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998), 89.

Returning to *El Niño*, Part Two has opened with the multi-faceted story of the wise men. The hypocrisy of Herod (Matthew 2) figures in this part. “Woe Unto Them That Call Evil Good” combines four verses from three completely different sections of Isaiah: chapters 5, 29 and 66. The verses from Isaiah 5 set the stage for a clear presentation of Herod’s character. Isa 5:20 functions in *El Niño* as quick information. There is no mistaking the opposites stated in rapid succession: evil-good, darkness-light, bitter-sweet.

The second woe statement, Isa 5:21, is not as rapid-fire, nor does it contain contrast, but is clearly understood because it follows the introductory contrasts, in case there was any question that “wise in their own eyes” was a good thing. The third woe (Isa 29:15), the subject of Chapter 3, has an even longer description of the behavior of those deserving the woe, but the way has been paved for us to quickly understand that the deeds being described are evil.

Chapter 3: Isaiah 29:15 in Part Two: #3 “Woe Unto Them That Call Evil Good”

Woe unto them that call evil good,
and good evil; that put darkness for light,
and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!

Woe unto them that are wise
in their own eyes, and prudent in
their own sight!

*Woe unto them that seek deep
to hide their counsel from the Lord,
and their works are in the dark,
and they say, Who seeth us?
and who knoweth us?*

I also will choose their delusions,
and will bring their fears upon them.

--Isaiah 5:20-21; Isaiah 29:15; Isaiah 66:4a

**Isaiah 29:15 Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for the Lord, whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?”** NRSV

Following the oracles-against-the-nations-section, from which the first of our *El Niño* verses came, Isaiah again turned his attention to God’s own people. Isaiah 26, which begins to lay the groundwork for the next *El Niño* Isaiah verse, opens with a song (vv. 1-6) that will be sung in the land of Judah “on that day.” The prepositional phrase “on that day” alerts the reader/hearer to a two-fold future: the soon to be and the prophetic End Time. The song written here is one of victory (v. 1) and peace (v. 3) for the righteous nation (v. 2).

The song in Isaiah that follows (Isa 26:7-21) is a song of yearning and crying out for the time when the song of victory will be sung. Seven times Judah cries out “O Lord.”³⁷ God speaks (Isa 26:20-21) to tell God’s people “not yet.” In a Passover-like gesture, God tells them to hide away because God’s punishing wrath for “the inhabitants of the earth” (earth as metaphor for the nations, i.e. not God’s people) is still to come. In a metaphor of

³⁷ Isa 26:8, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17.

childbirth (vv. 17-18a), Judah is portrayed as the mother who gives birth only to wind; there is much pain and crying, and birth does occur, but not in any productive way. The people's efforts come to nothing because they turned to God only under duress (v. 16). Much later in the book (66:13), in a shift of this same metaphor, God is portrayed as the mother, bringing comfort to her children.

Isaiah 27 again looks forward to “that day,” in both prose (vv. 1, 12-13) and poetry (vv. 2-11). Isaiah breaks down the singular concept, as light passing through a prism, into distinct component parts:

- Isa 27:1: God's ultimate punishment of evil forces
- Isa 27:2-5: God, as defender and guardian of Israel, will protect her in peace
- Isa 27:7-11: Israel has indeed been punished by God, sent into exile
- Isa 27:12-13: The people will be gathered as one to worship God in Jerusalem

The prose paragraphs, which begin and end Isaiah 27, are about judgment on Israel's enemies (v. 1) and the re-gathering of God's people from far-flung places to Jerusalem, “the holy mountain” (vv. 12-13). The poetry section in the middle (Isa 27:2-11) stands in contrast to the vineyard song written earlier in Isaiah (5:1-7). In the first song, Israel was a vineyard that produced nothing, even though the vinedresser (God) had cultivated it with care. In the new song, the vineyard, again with God as its keeper, will produce fruit to “fill the whole world” (Isa 27:6). Parts of the metaphor in v. 6—Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots—are also used elsewhere in the book. “He grew up...like a root out of dry ground” (53:2); “the desert shall rejoice and blossom abundantly” (35:1-2); and “a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse” (11:1). All three of these other instances are used

regularly as part of Advent and Christmas readings. The nativity resonance is not lost when we read Isa 27:6 and becomes another example of the power of repetitive suggestion.

Isaiah 28 contains two oracles: one against Ephraim, the northern kingdom (vv. 1-6) and the other against Judah, the southern kingdom. This second concentration on Judah begins in v. 7 and, with a few side-bar-type interruptions, continues through the end of chapter 34. The focus on Judah begun in Isaiah 28 provides the basis and background of the judgment that will narrow in on Jerusalem in Isaiah 29, from which the next of our *E/ Niño* verses comes.

The twenty-ninth chapter of Isaiah begins in Jerusalem. The dualities described here are personal and internal rather than conceptual as were the contrasts in Isaiah 5. In v. 13, the Lord speaks clearly: the people are going through the motions of worship, but it has no meaning. Isa 29:13 describes worship that is in the form of and appears to be an appropriate attitude toward God. The metaphor “draw near with their mouths, but not with their hearts” describes the difference between action and attitude.

Isa 29:13-14 go together as cause and effect in much the same kind of logical sequence that we saw previously in Isa 14:3-4. In that example, God’s action was on Israel’s behalf, paving the way for Israel’s victory. In this example, the pattern of action is reversed: *Because* you do X (v. 13) *therefore* I will do Y (v. 14). In Isaiah, this particular sequence usually has to do with disobedience and punishment. Most often these rhetorical set-ups are parallel in cause and effect, i.e. bad behavior causes bad things; good behavior causes good things. The “therefore” clause of this sequence is a surprise. In effect, because the people “don’t get it” (v. 13), God will do things so amazing that the wisdom and understanding of the wisest

will “perish,” will be “hidden,” will be blown away (Isa 29:14). So this time, bad behavior causes “amazing” (“marvelous” KJV) things.³⁸

Isa 29:14 continues the description of surprising outcomes, against the expectation of either the prophet or the reader/hearer. Wisdom shall perish; discernment shall be hidden. Every culture and time has special people who are exceptional in their wisdom and in their ability to discern the meaning behind the events of life. God is clear, however, that the fruits of humans’ efforts will come to nothing. It is only God who does amazing things.

With the preceding as background, Isa 29:15, the verse used in *El Niño*, brings “woe” upon those who think they can hide their plans from God. They think they can thwart God in the same ways that they can thwart other humans. Literal darkness generally makes things difficult, brings out our fears and is an impediment to confident action. Not so with God. In fact, in another passage, Isa 45:1-8, the author uses the images of both hidden things and darkness to show that God is more powerful than either. God will give away the treasure and riches of dark and secret places. God created light and darkness and is not overcome by either. Everyone knows that if you don’t want someone to find something, you hide it deep--in the ground, in the closet, far from sight. If you don’t want someone to see what you are doing, you act in the dark. You say with confidence, “Who sees us? Who knows us?” We

³⁸ The NRSV translation of Isa 29:14b—“shocking and amazing”—sounds like a contrast. KJV has translated the same words as “marvelous and a wonder,” which sounds more parallel and positive. The Hebrew words translated “shocking and amazing” are not the same word, but are related words: *pâlâ* and *pele’*. *Pâlâ* is from a primitive root and means to cause great, difficult, wondrous things; to accomplish hard, hidden marvelous things. It also carries the sense of separateness—separated out because of being wondrous, to make something a singular manifestation of its kind. *Pele’* means a miracle, a wondrous or marvelous thing. The Hebrew sense of Isa 29:14b, then, is not of distinct contrasting actions of God, but of two similar things. A clearer translation might be “so I will again do amazing things with this people, wondrous and marvelous.” See James Strong, “Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary,” *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible with Greek and Hebrew Dictionary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Crusade Bible Publishers, Inc), 94.

have gotten away with our deed. God, through Isaiah, uses sarcasm—one cannot hide a plan “too deep” for the Lord. The contrasts in Isa 29:15 are of the same type as were in Isaiah 5, yet are not self-delusions. Here, the prevailing motivation for the bad behavior seems to be intentionally subversive, the proverbial “Who’s going to know?” that justifies almost anything via ethical relativism.

Adams’s use of the word “woe” three times in “Woe Unto Them” reveals it as a word very rich in meaning. The word “developed two uses: an expression of despair in the face of calamity or a warning of calamity that is to come. In the latter sense, woe can take on the characteristics of a denunciation or a curse.”³⁹ It is in the curse sense that we usually understand the expression “woe unto them.” The full meaning, however, is more nuanced than that, as is the case with “rest,” discussed earlier.

Several Hebrew words have been translated as “woe” in English. All three occurrences in “Woe Unto Them” are the same word: *hōwy*. The NRSV translates this word as “Ah!,” which seems to be entirely different in tone. This sharp contrast between the two Bible translations is a clue that perhaps the English language does not do justice to the Hebrew word. Following the cross-references of words and meanings in Strong’s *Concordance Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary*, we find this path: *hōwy* (translated ah, alas, ho, O, woe) a prolonged form of → *hōw* (ho, oh, alas) by permutation of → *hābh* (ah, expressing grief) a shortened form of → *’ahābh* (Oh, ah, alas) a primitive word expressing pain exclamatorily. *Hōwy* is also related to, but is not derived from, the word *’ōwy* (Oh, alas, woe)

³⁹ James Rowe Adams, *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors* (Bend, Oregon: Rising Star Press, 2005), 274.

to long for, to cry out after, to lament and is from the primitive root *'âvâh* (to wish for, covet, desire).⁴⁰

“Woe” is probably a closer translation than “Ah,” but the nuance of grieving is still missing. The word at its fullest should be taken as an exclamation, somewhere between a moan and a shout. It is an utterance backed by so much emotion that a further explanation of one’s frame of mind is impossible at that time. It is an utterance that makes throwing dust in the air (Job 2:12), wearing sackcloth (Lam 2:10) and tearing one’s garments (Josh 7:6) not only possible, but necessary. In English, we tend to associate the grief aspect of “woe” with bringing grief upon someone. The Hebrew word seems to imply feeling one’s own grief with the saying of the word.

With this in mind, the three “woe” verses that make up “Woe Unto Them” further the emotional preparation of the audience that was begun by the music in the song which precedes in *El Niño*, “When Herod Heard.” Relying solely on the text, the audience does not know yet about Herod’s true scheme and the slaughter of the innocents to come. With a more nuanced understanding of the word “woe,” “Woe Unto Them” is about more than the judgment of Herod for a singular deed. It foreshadows the empathy and solidarity we feel toward all innocent victims. At our best, it also contains our grief for Herod—for him as a person of self-involvement, violence and misuse of power—the same kind of person that Isaiah has been describing.

Isa 29:16 is the indictment of those named in v. 15. God is clear, yet bemused. The people are just wrong. The answers to the rhetorical questions in Isa 29:16 are obvious and validate the opening point in v. 16a: “You turn things upside down!” God is Creator. Using

⁴⁰ Strong, *Exhaustive Concordance*, 1180, “Hebrew Dictionary,” 32, 9.

three metaphors for creator and created, Isaiah makes it clear precisely which position humans hold. In choosing to follow 5:20-21 with 29:15, Adams makes the problem being adjudicated an even deeper one. Hubris expands the problem of complete moral blindness. In both texts, woe is called forth for those who have it backwards, whose faces are turned away from God, who spurn the Creator God in favor of the idol of themselves.

Isaiah 29 laments that what the people are calling wisdom and discernment are in reality emptiness and self-deception. They have followed this path so many times (calling darkness light and evil good) that they have come to believe it themselves. Their wisdom is in fact foolishness. God's wisdom "can do all things...renews all things..." (Wis 7:27); the people's wisdom can do nothing and will come to nothing. In fact, it is a negative force, sucking the lifeblood out of themselves and others. Woe unto them indeed!

Chapter 4: Isaiah 66:4a in Part Two: #3 “Woe Unto Them That Call Evil Good”

Woe unto them that call evil good,
and good evil; that put darkness for light,
and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!

Woe unto them that are wise
in their own eyes, and prudent in
their own sight!

Woe unto them that seek deep
to hide their counsel from the Lord,
and their works are in the dark,
and they say, Who seeth us?
and who knoweth us?

*I also will choose their delusions,
and will bring their fears upon them.*

--Isaiah 5:20-21; Isaiah 29:15; Isaiah 66:4a

Isaiah 66:4a I also will choose to mock them, and bring upon them what they fear;

NRSV

Isaiah 66 stands as the final chapter of the book. Whether the book was written by one, two or three authors, this concluding chapter critiques again those who insist on their own way, particularly in worship. The point is made once more that the fundamental mistake is in failing to acknowledge God as Creator, who is therefore worthy of the most reverent and humble worship.

The first five verses present yet another series of contrasting images. In Isa 5:20-21, the dualities were conceptual—good/evil, darkness/light, etc. In Isa 29:15, the dualities were internal and personal, having to do with attitudes and motivations of the heart. The contrasts in chapter 66 are presented as facts/falsifications. Creation is again the starting point, spoken by God in the powerful, “Thus says the Lord.” Heaven as God’s throne and earth as God’s footstool (v. 1) portray through contrasting language the omniscient and omnipresent

nature of the Creator. Against that image, any house that humans might erect for God to use as a resting place seems ridiculous. So how *can* humans have contact with and even a relationship with God? The answer is—personally. Isaiah gives us the words of the Lord—it is by approaching with a humble and contrite spirit (v. 2). There are four dictionary meanings for “humble:” free from pride/vanity, lowly in station, servile, respectful. A combination of the first and last are an appropriate way to approach God. To be contrite is to be “deeply and humbly sorry for one’s sins, penitent, remorseful.”⁴¹ “Humble” and “contrite” are not words that carry much attraction today. Being humble is seen as weakness. Being contrite is antithetical to the individualism of the self-centered society in which we live, yet it is this interior attitude that is God’s preference and desire. “God’s presence is not bound to a material structure...God will be present in the very heart of every man.”⁴²

What does it mean to “tremble at my word” (Isa 66:2)? This phrase appears to mean that we should be afraid of God, as responding to an oppressor, violator, or abuser. Each of the images of our response to such a God can quite easily become a cartoon version of itself, i.e. groveling, fearful. There is a fine but distinct line between the caricatured version and one that has more to do with awe, respect and appropriate relationship of the created to the Creator.

Isa 66:3 is a long verse that uses a series of similes to liken what ought to be appropriate worship with very inappropriate and even repugnant behavior.

The NRSV translation suggests a blanket condemnation of the sacrificial system, but this is only one possible interpretation. The word *like* is not in the Hebrew, and the verse may be translated in a way that simply condemns

⁴¹ *The Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1967), s.v. humble, contrite

⁴² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans/ed Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), 192.

normal worship practices when the worshiper is also engaging in pagan rituals or an immoral life... The latter interpretation fits better with the complaint that the wicked *have chosen their own ways*.⁴³

An ox was offered for a sacrifice of well-being (Lev 9:4, fully described in Leviticus 3). A lamb was offered for a burnt offering (Lev 9:3, fully described in Leviticus 1), “acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you” (Lev 1:4). A grain offering was to present a pleasing odor to the Lord and was to provide for the priests as well (Lev 2:2-10, fully described in Leviticus 2). The memorial offering of frankincense (Lev 2:2) was to remind the people that they belonged to God. “Part of the identity of the people of God comes from remembering God’s great acts and faithfulness and the origins of His people. Remembrance leads to gratitude and praise for the present and hope and security for the future.”⁴⁴

The sacrificial system had been carefully prescribed and Isaiah affirmed from beginning (1:11) to end that the people were *doing* the sacrifices. Over and over again, the message was reiterated that doing them wasn’t enough. Isa 66:3 compares the sacrifices to unthinkable acts (human murder, offering a dog, offering swine’s blood, blessing an idol). The tone of the verse compares favorably with 5:20-21 in that things are so out of hand that the people think evil is good. They do not understand that their perfectly offered sacrifices are an abomination—they have completely missed the point. They are worshipping in their own way (v. 3), not God’s.

Isa 66:4 must contain unclear Hebrew because the translations vary so widely: “I also will choose their delusions” (KJV) = “I also will choose to mock them” (NRSV) = “I also will choose their punishments” (New American Standard). Overall, it seems that God will

⁴³ J. M. M. Roberts, notes on Isaiah 66:3, 1107.

⁴⁴ Bromiley, s.v. memorial, 315.

now treat them as they treated God. They chose to ignore the intent and heart of what God said to them and chose their *own* way instead. In response, (all translations agree) it is now God who will be the one to choose the consequences.

As a song text, “Woe Unto Them” combines verses from three different sections of Isaiah—two from First Isaiah and one from the last chapter, chapter 66, by Third Isaiah—all of which present dualities. One could accuse Adams of having taken these verses out of context, with the worst implications of that term. One could also say, in perspective, that Isaiah is also a constructed collection of texts rather than a through-composed book. For a fairly lengthy book, there are surprisingly few themes and the sampling of verses used in *El Niño* touch on most of them: promise, hope, rest, the power of God and the relationship that one needs with God in order to see and experience fulfillment.

Regarding the woe sayings in Isaiah 5, H. G. M. Williamson has written that “these woe sayings were probably originally independent sayings...but care has been taken over their present literary arrangement...It is not unreasonable to think that there may be two different levels of meaning.”⁴⁵ In fact, the themes represented by these verses from Isaiah 5, 29 and 66 are the same. The dualities under scrutiny emphasize a religious either/or. One is either for God or against God. One is either open to God’s wisdom or closed to it. Yes, there is the grey of dawn and dusk, but basically light and darkness are the given choices.

We have seen how each woe has grown out of the life of God’s people in the time of Isaiah. In a different context, as part of *El Niño*, the motivation for these woes comes from the surrounding libretto texts. Adams has gathered the Isaiah verses and inserted them as

⁴⁵ H. G. M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27*, vol. 1, *Commentary on Isaiah 1-5* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 384.

Part Two, Song #3, into the midst of Matthew 2. (Mt 2:1-8 is Part Two, Song #2 “When Herod Heard” and Mt 2:9-11 is Part Two, Song #4 “And the Star Went Before Them.” See Appendix E for texts.)

In this context, as part of the nativity story, the Isaiah “woes” comment on the behavior and motivations of Herod, the Judean king from 37-4 BCE. Herod was wise in his own eyes. He was primarily motivated by his desire to maintain his power, position, and authority. He was afraid of losing them and acted in his own best interest to preserve them. He justified his behavior in those terms, regardless of harm or even death to others in the process. “Though in theory an independent monarch, Herod understood that the exercise of his power was dependent upon knowing his place in relation to Rome. This relationship had to be maintained at all costs and the fact that he remained in power so long, is a testimony to his cunning and political genius.”⁴⁶

Herod’s pattern of thought did not represent a traditional, religiously-motivated Jewish way of life. As a king serving Rome at will, he lived with the fact that his position could be taken away at any moment. His violent, ruthless ruling style was made possible in part by his shrewdness. He knew where to make concessions and where he needed to use violence to hold onto power. He knew when violence was the most prudent course and he had no scruples that prevented him from using it. The slaughter of the innocents (Matthew 2, which Adams used as the source of text for four songs in this section of *El Niño*) could only have taken place if the perpetrator cared more about himself than others. Herod made the choice for evil—following human wisdom, not God’s.

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Wigoder, General Editor, *The Illustrated Dictionary & Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005), s.v. Herod (the Great), 408.

The importance of “Woe Unto Them,” appearing as it does between Mt 2:8 and Mt 2:9, is that Adams has taken the time at this point in the story to pronounce woe upon Herod. The biblical narrative does not comment on Herod’s behavior at this time. An unsuspecting reader/audience with no prior knowledge of the story has not yet been told that Herod has evil motives. The text of the preceding song, “When Herod Heard,” portrays Herod as an inquirer/seeker “that I may come and worship him also” (Mt 2:8), with only a hint that he has an ulterior motive. The first subtle indication is that the word “where” that is part of Herod’s question to the wise men, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” is a musical allusion to the word “Mary” from “Now She Was Sixteen Years Old.” It has the same plaintive two-note call, made more so by being accompanied on the English horn, an instrument whose sound is often characterized as mournful. Upon hearing it, we remember that “Now She” was a dispute and we hear the tension in those two notes. The orchestral background to “When Herod Heard” sounds ominous, like the soundtrack to a thriller. The low, moving piano part pushes forward in a menacing way.

“Woe Unto Them” serves as an audience safety valve—the horror of what Herod will soon do is so great that we need to be prepared to know about it. So Adams helps the audience with what appears, textually, as a Woe aria. By the time it is finished, the audience is ready for some kind of disaster. The chorus sings as one, for emphasis, in “Woe Unto Them” in another nod to Handel’s style. There are also metallic sounds which, on one level, have nothing to do with the song itself, but, on a second level, sound very harsh, adding to our impression. And on yet a third level, the sounds foreshadow the slaying, which will not be explicitly told until Song #8, five songs away.

As the chorus sings the woes of “Woe Unto Them,” the baritone (as Herod) keeps coming back in with a line from the preceding song, “Go and search diligently for the young child.” We come to understand that Herod *is* all the things that are being sung about. He is, in one person, the sum of all that Isaiah railed against in the name of God. Poor Herod. By the end of “Woe Unto Them,” he is clearly the villain in this tale. All that he feared would soon be upon him. His delusion was that he thought he could continue to ruthlessly remain in power indefinitely. And he thought that Jesus was a threat to his kingly power. He was wrong on both counts. Herod himself died shortly after Jesus’ birth (in 4 BCE according to Josephus)⁴⁷ and Jesus’ kingdom was not of the governmental kind.

We who know the Christmas story from Matthew have a difficult time remaining loose with the timeline of *El Niño* because we know all of the plot points. We know what Herod is going to do. In our minds, it has already happened, but in *El Niño*, not yet. The music is what allows us to move forward toward the impending horror, even when the text of neither “When Herod Heard” nor “Woe Unto Them” has directly gone there yet. Adams has forewarned the listener that all is not well. It is the music that allows us both to suspend our conclusions and to be held in uncertainty and disquiet.

⁴⁷ Flavius Josephus, *The Complete Works of Josephus*, “Antiquities of the Jews,” trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1981), 366.

Chapter 5: Isaiah 30:25-26 in Part Two, #10 “In the Day of the Great Slaughter”

*And there shall be upon every
high mountain, and upon every
high hill, rivers and streams of
waters in the day of the great
slaughter, when the towers fall.*

*The light of the
moon shall be as the light of the
sun, and the light of the sun shall
be sevenfold, as the light of seven
days, in the day that the Lord
bindeth up the breach of his people,
and healeth the stroke of
their wound.*

--Isaiah 30:25-26

Isaiah 30:25-26 On every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water—on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days, on the day when the Lord binds up the injuries of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow. NRSV

Isaiah 30 begins with a reversal of tone.

The chapter is built up from a number of short prophetic sayings (vv. 1-5; 6-7; 12-14; 15-17) deriving from the time of King Hezekiah's rebellion against Assyria (703-701 BCE) and the negotiations with Egypt for protection. Subsequently, admonitions (vv. 8-11) and assurances (vv. 18-26; 29-33) were added. The assurance includes a warning: God will judge wrongdoers (vv. 27-28).⁴⁸

The chapter is made up of poetic oracles and descriptive prose, which is generally understood by scholars as having been added much later.⁴⁹

The first five verses are addressed to God's "rebellious children" (v. 1). "These memorable phrases present a central teaching: Salvation and peace come through trusting in

⁴⁸ Ronald E. Clements, "Isaiah" notes, *The Access Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, Gail R. O'Day and David Peterson, Gen. Editors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 910.

⁴⁹ Childs, *Isaiah*, 227.

God, not through human plans and alliances.”⁵⁰ Isaiah makes specific reference to the plans that Judah is making with Egypt. As we have noted before, even with evidence to the contrary, God’s people are expected to trust God—not rely on human strength. The result of this misplaced trust in Egypt will be shame and humiliation (vv. 3, 5).

The oracle that begins in Isa 30:6 is introduced as “concerning the animals of the Negeb.” The animals (v. 6) are metaphors. Trouble and distress are the lion and viper. Wealth and riches are donkeys and camels. Isa 30:7 is the pronouncement again that “Egypt’s help is worthless.” To emphasize the points in these two verses, the writer used doubles: trouble and distress, lion and lioness, viper and flying serpent, riches and treasures, donkeys and camels, backs and humps, worthless and empty. Rahab was the name of a sea monster that had been slain by God.⁵¹ Names in the Bible carry important meanings and here God does call Egypt “Rahab”—a menacing presence set geographically next to God’s people. But God’s full name for Egypt is “Rahab who sits still” (30:7). Next to God, Egypt has no power. Egypt can thrash around all she wants, but ultimately that will not help Judah or itself.

Isa 30:8-14 describe denial. God’s children aren’t listening to the words of the prophets. So God instructs that the words must be written down. Oral tradition provides for immediacy and imagination. Tradition cannot be passed on in this way unless people are actively engaged in both the giving and the receiving. If people will not hear (v. 9), there is no recourse. Written text is different. It can serve “as a witness forever” (v. 8).

⁵⁰ Clements, “Isaiah”, 910.

⁵¹ See Isaiah 51:9-10; Job 9:13; 26:12-13; Psalm 89:9-10. J. M. M. Roberts, “Isaiah” notes, 1053.

Isaiah 30 confirms this theory by continuing to serve as witness that the God of Israel is a God of justice (v. 18), waiting for the people to return. In a cycle of gracious caring and harsh judgment, the chapter eventually moves on to judgment of Assyria. Just as earlier in the chapter, in the oracle concerning the animals, doubles are used in 30:15 for emphasis: “returning and rest,” “quietness and trust.” The key to understanding the context of the verses used in *El Niño* (v. 25-26) is Isa 30:18. Throughout the book, “therefore” is used by Isaiah for key statements and there are two in this one verse, highlighting that “God waits to be gracious to you” and “he will rise up to show mercy to you.”

Isa 30:19-26, of which the *El Niño* text for “In the Day of Great Slaughter” is a part, function as a short commentary on 30:18, an “exegetical expansion”⁵² on the concept of the graciousness of God. They are about God’s caring and responsiveness. Guidance is also a theme through the image of Teacher. Isa 30:23-26 turn to creation images to envision how things will be: plants, animals, earth, and water are all described in terms that suggest environmental well-being. Isa 30:26 concentrates on images of light—bright light of moon and sun. In the dual thinking of dark=evil and light=goodness, the verse adds to the comfort of how it will be. “Even the light from the moon and sun is altered in the new future world as a sign commensurate with a people healed of its wounds.”⁵³ The end of 30:26, which explains under what circumstances this will take place, is a disturbing image of binding up injuries and comforting the very one that you have punished. It is unsettling and difficult to modern ears, suggestive of a cycle of physical abuse that is all too frequent in our society.

⁵² Childs, *Isaiah*, 227.

⁵³ Childs, *Isaiah*, 227.

The other phrase in 30:25 that seems out of place amongst the idyllic scenery is “on a day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall.” If one removed that phrase, the passage would present a more unified picture. Indeed, G. G. D. Kilpatrick in the *Interpreter’s Bible* states it is “incongruous here and appears to have been displaced from before vs. 29.”⁵⁴ It is that phrase, however, that links the Isaiah verses to the storyline of *El Niño* and serves as the title for Song #10.

The Isaiah verses of Part Two, Song #10, “In the Day of Great Slaughter,” are used to comment on the slaughter of innocents, both ancient and modern. As part of the traditional nativity story, they refer back to Herod’s action, the subject of #8, “And He Slew All the Children,” the text of which is just one verse from Matthew 2. That verse states the fact of the killing, making the text function as a piece of recitative, even if the music does not follow that form. In an operatic style equally common to oratorios, a recitative moves the action forward. It is normally followed by an aria that serves to emotionally respond to the action.

In responding to “And He Slew,” Adams has made an unusual choice for the text. The aria (#9 “Memorial De Tlatelolco”—see Appendix F for text) comments not on the specifics of #8 “And He Slew”, but on a modern parallel. Certainly fulfilling the emotional requirement of an aria, “Memorial” is about the unprovoked slaughter in Mexico City on October 2, 1968 of several hundred adults, youth and children who were at or near a demonstration against government repression. The square where this happened had seen such violence before: “On 13 August 1521, Tlatelolco, now part of Mexico City, was the

⁵⁴ G. G. D. Kilpatrick, *Exposition* to “The Book of Isaiah, chapters 1-39,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 5 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 335.

scene of the last great confrontation between the Aztecs and Cortés and his conquistadors.”⁵⁵ “Memorial” in text and music carries the anger of all such incomprehensible brutality against those who cannot defend themselves, including the innocents slaughtered by Herod.

Either listening or reading, one is exhausted after “Memorial.” Song #10, “In the Day,” which contains Isa 30:25-26, gently appears next, almost unbidden. It comments on two slaughters of the innocents—Herod’s and the Mexican government’s. Its message of hope confuses, but yet...that quality defines hope. In Isaiah, the verses used in this song are part of “an oracle of promise”⁵⁶ (30:18-26). Adams has again used the KJV; this time, without alteration. The NRSV is slightly more benign. According to traditional English usage, the “shall” language of the KJV implies requirement. These things shall happen—they must. Commenting on the subject of unbelievable violence, the forceful “shall” is appropriate. The NRSV uses “will” to state facts without the necessity of assigning any powerful motivation. The promised redemption just “is,” albeit in the future.

Like other passages where God promises to wipe away all tears (Isa 25:8, Rev 7:17, 21:4), this oracle to the people of Jerusalem provides the comfort of *ultimate* assurance, God’s rest. Such passages are common readings at funerals. How appropriate for there to be such comfort offered in *El Niño* just after the rage of “Memorial.” The day of comfort, the day promised, however, is in the future. The entire oracle is written in future tense.

⁵⁵ Michael Steinberg, “Nativity,” 26.

⁵⁶ J. M. M. Roberts, “Isaiah” notes, 1054.

Chapter 6: The Feminine/Liberation Voice in *El Niño*

The remaining three songs in *El Niño* that follow “In the Day” have extra-biblical texts: a poem by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and selections from the deuterocanonical Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew which spill over into a concluding poem by Rosario Castellanos. All mention rest and refreshment, a main theme of this oratorio. This was a principal subject for the prophet Isaiah as well. Closely related is hope, which anticipates that rest will be fulfilled. For the people of Israel in Isaiah’s time, rest centered on the promise of being God’s chosen people. At its root, this chosen-ness is about being able to be in the presence of God, a hope shared by religious people down through the ages. The author of the book of Hebrews struggled with these same ancient promises of rest and hope, seeking to understand and teach in retrospect how Jesus fulfilled God’s promises through faith.

One of Adams’s early goals in writing this work was to explore his own religious belief. Just as the process of writing a sermon sometimes takes a preacher to unexpected places, I wonder what Adams learned about the miracle of birth in the process of researching, writing, producing and living the early performances of *El Niño*. I wonder if he can now articulate more clearly what he believes.

Another goal

was that he wanted women’s voices clearly heard in a work whose subject was birth... ‘Seldom in the officially sanctioned stories is there any more than a passing awareness of the misery and pain of labor, of the uncertainty and doubt of pregnancy, or of that mixture of supreme happiness and inexplicable emptiness that follow the moment of birth.’⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Steinberg, “Nativity,” 16.

That usually unmentioned emotional side of pregnancy and birth tends to be manifested in real life as a whirlpool of slurry rather than as neat, clear parallel tracks. *El Niño* audiences may feel that same kind of instability. One reviewer wrote that

[t]he staging [of *El Niño*] diverted attention among the poetic text (projected under the film), complex music, acting, dancing, and an intricate interaction of stage and screen movement. It is a total experience—confusing, overwhelming but also, in its multiple parts, liberating. It allows nothing to be taken for granted, which is, after all, the whole point of a miracle.⁵⁸

The combination of music, text, action and film that caused audiences to be confused and frustrated is itself a profound metaphor for the pregnancy/birth experience.

Adams also accomplished the goal of speaking with feminine voice through his choices of both traditional and non-traditional texts. Because of the repetitive nature of Christmas pageants, Lessons & Carols and holiday *Messiah* performances, most Americans have come to understand the nativity in a homogenized version. This version does contain elements from both Matthew and Luke, the standard sources of the nativity story, each of which presents different details and follows different trajectories. “For the Matthean reader, therefore, the theme of promise/fulfillment, which is integral to the unfolding of the Jesus story, enables the reader to expect fulfillment of those promises that point beyond the story itself.”⁵⁹ The same could be said for the hearers/readers of the Isaiah prophecies used in *El Niño*, which makes their selection as comments on the nativity story so creative. In Luke’s nativity, Mary is idealized, somewhat removing her personhood.

Hers is what Luke considers a woman’s perfect response to the word of God: obedient trust and self-sacrifice. The dominant mood of Luke’s first

⁵⁸ Mark Swed, “Rebirth of a Savior in El Niño” in Thomas May, *The John Adams Reader* (Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006), 364.

⁵⁹ Elaine Wainwright, “The Gospel of Matthew” in Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed. *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1994), 635.

chapter is one of celebration and serenity, and the narrative atmosphere is one of delicacy and restraint, in contrast to the story of danger and moral dilemma in Matthew 1... Luke conveys the 'good news' of the power and respectability of the Christian faith... The tradition affirms that the child to be born will be God's because the Holy Spirit is ultimately responsible for his conception. The pregnancy is no accident or mistake, but divinely ordained. The *Magnificat* is not the song of a victim but one that proclaims liberation with tough authority.⁶⁰

Adams has gone one more step (textually) by adding extra material to round out both details and reflections on the action. He has reworked the "voice" of the story by three means: added poetry by Spanish women, careful selection of religious texts, and imaginative arrangement of the selections.

An example of this artistic change of voice can be seen/heard in the sequence in Part One of "Now She" and "Joseph's Dream." A traditional female reading of the story of Joseph's part in the pre-birth narrative, gleaned from either Matthew or Luke, will most likely produce positive feelings toward Joseph. He is a thoughtful and considerate protector. He is a good man. He listens to and obeys God. He is also the stronger character who dominates the direction of the action before the child is born. The term in literary criticism for this identification with a male character by a female reader is immasculation.⁶¹ Adams has added material from Infancy James and other sources and has adapted that material to cause the audience to feel negatively toward Joseph and more sympathetic to Mary. Michael Steinberg noticed this and comments somewhat regretfully regarding "A Palm Tree" (Part Two, #13 from the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew): "the passage is another that exhibits

⁶⁰ Jane Schaberg, "Luke" in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 285.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Janice Capel Anderson, "Literary-Critical Methods" in *Searching the Scriptures: An Introduction*, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 250.

delightfully sharp human perception, and again, I am afraid, at the expense of the blunt Joseph, who might be any modern American *paterfamilias* on a cross-country car trip.”⁶²

The particularity of the Hispanic woman’s voice is heard in the six poetic selections in Spanish. The emotional content of the oratorio is highest there. All six poems focus on the humanity of Mary. Even modern day “Memorial for Tlatelolco” rips Mary into the twentieth century to comment upon timeless violent power, fearful flight, and the shameful killing of innocent souls under cover of darkness. The “I remember. We must remember...” of the poem echoes, “and Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Lk 2:19, 51).

Aida Irizarry-Fernández has written:

The resilience of Latino communities is admirable. Despite much pain and disillusionment, they always hope for a better mañana (tomorrow). ‘What else could go wrong?’ is a rhetorical question I often hear in the midst of crises. This question always receives the same response, ‘Do not lose heart; mañana will be a better day.’ Such conversations might suggest an element of fatalism in Latino/Hispanic culture. Whether or not this perception is accurate, I suggest that these conversations speak of a people of deep faith. People who scream, cry, and even throw temper tantrums in response to life’s trials in one moment will, in the next, laugh, joke, and even dance. ‘Life is too short’ is the philosophy of many; ‘Mañana is always better.’⁶³

Irizarry- Fernández’s characterization of Latino/Hispanic culture as one of deep faith also speaks of a culture of great hope. Their resilience, despite a history of oppression and exploitation at the hands of others, is not blind. They hold the cruelty of the past in their memory. These same things can be said of God’s chosen people who were the recipients of

⁶² Steinberg, “Nativity,” 28.

⁶³ Aida Irizarry-Fernández, “A Communal Reading: See—Judge—Act: A Different Approach to Bible Study,” in Choi Hee An and Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, ed., *Engaging the Bible: Critical Readings from Contemporary Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 56.

Isaiah's writings. Indeed, the steadfast love of God is for all, to be a source of hope in the face of life's obstacles.

The Spanish poet Antonio Machado has written:

Sojourner, there is no path,
The path is built as we walk...
The path is built as we walk.⁶⁴

Adams has built a path that is his unique telling of the story of the birth of Jesus. Before we have heard the first notes however, we are like the people of ancient Israel, Mary and Joseph, exiles and struggling people everywhere. We are sojourners, with no path. When the performance begins, each song builds on the one before and each song becomes a stepping stone. At the end, we know we have heard a familiar, yet new story.

The Isaiah verses shine a light on the themes of promise, hope, fulfillment, rest, and the power of God. They are the same themes raised year after year during Advent by Isaiah and other Old Testament prophets. The themes are a link in the historical chain of the human story that reaches from ancient times to the time of Mary and Joseph to the cusp of the twenty-first century when *El Niño* was composed. I wish I knew what had drawn Adams to the Isaiah verses that he chose. The marvel of his work is that each text serves to illuminate the others. By crafting *El Niño* so creatively, Adams has opened the door to allow the audience to participate in the creation process. The complexity of resonance is such that the more knowledge and imagination one brings to the composition, the more one will receive from it.

Analyzing the *El Niño* libretto has modeled for me the creative possibilities in working with a varied group of texts, such as the lectionary texts. Whereas they may seem to

⁶⁴ Antonio Machado, quoted in Aida Irizarry-Fernández, "A Communal Reading," 49.

be unconnected on any particular Sunday, an imaginative yet careful analysis may reveal resonance in surprising ways. That may occur within a particular phrase, such as in the title *El Niño* used here. In two short words, it brings to mind the coalescence of “the Hispanic component,”⁶⁵ the baby boy, and the large-scale weather pattern, which has a far-reaching effect on all aspects of how we are able to live our lives in its presence. There may also be subtle connections between lectionary readings that ultimately reveal the unity of the larger biblical story. The Isaiah texts traditionally used during Advent, for example, contain the same themes that the *El Niño* Isaiah texts contain. They will hold a richer meaning for me and will bring a new set of connections to the New Testament lessons when I hear them next year. I have now seen how adaptations and new juxtapositions of texts can help to tell old stories in new ways. This suggests possibilities for creating many evocative portions of liturgies, from children’s sermons to Eucharistic prayers. The challenge will be to craft them as intentionally and creatively as Adams did.

In reviewing *El Niño* for the *Los Angeles Times*, Mark Swed wrote:

What is truly modern and new about *El Niño* is its message: that the way to unite a divisive world is to look at the birth of Christ not as a religious miracle but a biological one. Birth itself, Adams and Sellars suggest, invests spiritual power in every individual.⁶⁶

Swed had the right idea, but didn’t go far enough in either time or concept. The religious miracle and biological miracle of the birth of Christ are one and the same and represent the most ancient of thoughts. “The active presence of God in the midst of his people is a part of the oldest and most enduring Biblical promises... The promise of that presence was fulfilled

⁶⁵ Steinberg, “Nativity,” 16.

⁶⁶ Mark Swed, “Rebirth,” 363.

in different ways throughout history until it reached its fullness in a manner which surpassed all expectations: God became man.”⁶⁷

El Niño breaks open the nativity story metaphorically with added media, and also concretely by shifting the content away from focus on the single birth. The story does not treat Jesus as the hero, but is fundamentally about something larger—God’s presence and relationship with humanity through all of life’s events—from good to bad and in between.

It is only a short step from acknowledging God’s presence within humans to the reason for that presence—to foster justice, the central thrust of the theology of liberation that has come to us so powerfully from the Hispanic struggle to understand their own history and context in relationship to God. “To know Yahweh is to establish just relationships among men, it is to recognize the rights of the poor. The God of Biblical revelation is known through interhuman justice.”⁶⁸ The book of Isaiah records the struggle of God’s ancient people to reconcile their own experience with the fulfillment of the promises of God. Their vacillation between tenuous hope and unyielding trust is the story of humanity’s level of (un)certainly about the presence of God from the earliest days to today. Adams’s goal to include women’s voices in his birth story seems to have been motivated by justice. His choice of including Hispanic women’s voices brings his effort into even sharper relief against the usual telling. The promise of the presence of God has always been the same and our hope has always been the same: “God’s promise to you and me—where there is no violence, only the power of God in each one of us.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 190.

⁶⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 195.

⁶⁹ Irizarry-Fernández, “A Communal Reading,” 60.

APPENDIX

A: List of Songs in *El Niño*

Part One

1. I Sing of a Maiden
2. Hail, Mary, Gracious!
3. La Anunciación (The Annunciation)
4. For With God No Thing Shall Be Impossible
5. The Babe Leaped in Her Womb
6. Magnificat
7. Now She Was Sixteen Years Old
8. Joseph's Dream
9. Shake the Heavens
10. Se Habla de Gabriel (Speaking of Gabriel)
 Now I, Joseph Was Walking About
11. The Christmas Star
 O Quam Preciosa (O How Precious)

Part Two

1. Pues Mi Dios Ha Nacido a Penar (Because My Lord Was Born to Suffer)
2. When Herod Heard
3. Woe Unto Them That Call Evil Good
4. And the Star Went Before Them
5. The Three Kings
6. And When They Were Departed
7. Dawn Air
8. And He Slew All the Children
9. Memorial de Tlatelolco (Memorial for Tlatelolco)
10. In the Day of the Great Slaughter
11. Pues Está Tiritando (Since Love is Shivering)
12. Jesus and the Dragons
13. A Palm Tree
 Una Palmera (A Palm)

B: *El Niño* Part One #7 “Now She Was Sixteen Years Old”

Now she was sixteen years old when these strange events happened to her. It came to be the sixth month for her, and behold, Joseph came from his buildings; and he came into his house and found her pregnant.

He struck his face and threw himself to the ground. he wept bitterly, saying “Who is he who has deceived me? Who did this evil thing in my house and defiled her? Mary, why did you do this? Who is he who has deceived me?”

She wept bitterly, saying, “I am pure, and I do not know a man.”

Joseph said to her. “Whence then is this which is in your womb?”

She said, “As the Lord my God lives,
I do not know whence it came to me.”

--Gospel of James (adapted)

C: Texts of Handel's and Adams's Songs using Haggai 2:6-7

Messiah Part One #5 "Thus Saith the Lord" by Georg Frederick Handel

Thus saith the Lord, the Lord of Hosts:
Yet once a little while, and I will shake the heavens and the earth,
the sea and the dry land;
And I will shake all nations;
And the desire of all nations shall come.
The Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to His temple,
Even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in;
Behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of Hosts.

--Haggai 2:6,7 - Malachi 3:1

El Niño Part One #9 "Shake the Heavens"

For thus saith the Lord:

Yet once, it is a little while,
and I will shake the heavens,
and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land:
And I will shake all nations,
and the desire of all nations shall come:
and I will fill this house with glory
and in this place I will give peace.

--Haggai 6-7; 9 [sic]

They drew near to Bethlehem—
they were three miles distant—
And Joseph turned and saw Mary weeping,
and he said,
"Probably that which is in her is distressing her."
Once again Joseph turned and saw her laughing,
and he said, "Mary, how is it that I see your face
at one moment laughing and at another time gloomy?"
She said to Joseph, "It is because I see two peoples
with my eyes, the one weeping and mourning,
and other rejoicing and glad."

--Gospel of James

D: Christmas Sermon by Martin Luther, 1521, paragraphs 7, 8 and 9

“The Story of the Birth of Jesus; and the Angel’s Song” Luke 2:1-14

7. Now they evidently owned an ass, upon which Mary rode, although the Gospel does not mention it, and it is possible that she went on foot with Joseph. Imagine how she was despised at the inns and stopping places on the way, although worthy to ride in state in a chariot of gold.

There were, no doubt, many wives and daughters of prominent men at that time, who lived in fine apartments and great splendor, while the mother of God takes a journey in mid-winter under most trying circumstances. What distinctions there are in the world! It was more than a day's journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in the land of Judea. They had to journey either by or through Jerusalem, for Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem while Nazareth is north.

8. The Evangelist shows how, when they arrived at Bethlehem, they were the most insignificant and despised, so that they had to make way for others until they were obliged to take refuge in a stable, to share with the cattle, lodging, table, bedchamber and bed, while many a wicked man sat at the head in the hotels and was honored as lord. No one noticed or was conscious of what God was doing in that stable. He lets the large houses and costly apartments remain empty, lets their inhabitants eat, drink and be merry; but this comfort and treasure are hidden from them. O what a dark night this was for Bethlehem, that was not conscious of that glorious light! See how God shows that he utterly disregards what the world is, has or desires; and furthermore, that the world shows how little it knows or notices what God is, has and does.

9. See, this is the first picture with which Christ puts the world to shame and exposes all it does and knows. It shows that the world's greatest wisdom is foolishness, her best actions are wrong and her greatest treasures are misfortunes. What had Bethlehem when it did not have Christ? What have they now who at that time had enough? What do Joseph and Mary lack now, although at that time they had no room to sleep comfortably?

E: Two *El Niño* Texts from Matthew 2

El Niño Part Two #2 “When Herod Heard”

Now when Jesus was born in
Bethlehem of Judaea,
in the days of Herod, the king, behold,
there came wise men from the east
to Jerusalem, saying,

Where is he that is born King of the Jews?
for we have seen his star in the east,
and are come to worship him.

Now when Herod had heard these things,
he was troubled, and he privily called
the wise men,
inquired of them diligently what time the
star appeared.
And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying,

Go and search diligently for the young child,
and when you have found him
bring me word again, that I may come
and worship him also.

--Matthew 2:1-8

El Niño Part Two #4 “And The Star Went Before Them”

When they had heard the king, they departed:
and lo, the star, which they saw in the east,
went before them, till it came and stood over
where the young child was.
And when they were come into the house,
they saw the young child with Mary his mother,
and fell down, and worshipped him,
and when they had opened their treasures,
they presented unto him gifts;
gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

--Matthew 2:9-11

F: *El Niño* Part Two #9 “Memorial For Tlatelolco”

(in translation from the Spanish by John Adams)

Darkness engenders violence
and violence demands darkness
to coagulate in crime.

That is why October the second waited until night
so that no one might see the hand that clutched
the weapon, but only its flash in the dark.

And in that light, brief and livid, who?

Who is he who kills?

Who are they that are in agony? Who are dying?

Who are they that flee without shoes?

Those who will be thrown into prison?

Those who will rot in the hospital?

Who are those who will forever remain mute
out of fear?

Who? Who? No. one. On the following day, no one.

Dawn broke on the plaza cleanly swept; the newspapers
spoke of the weather
as their main story.

And on the television, on the radio, and in the cinema
there was no change of program,
no interrupting news bulletin nor even
a minute of silence at the banquet.
(And so the banquet proceeded.)

Don't search for that which is not there; clues, corpses,
for everything has been given up as offering to a goddess:
to the Devourer of Excrement.

Don't sift through the archives because nothing
has been recorded there.

Ah, violence demands darkness
because darkness engenders the dream
and we can sleep dreaming that we can dream.

But here I touch an open wound: it is my memory.
It hurts, therefore it is true. It bleeds real blood.
And if I call it mine I betray everyone.

I remember. We remember.

This is our way of helping the dawn to break
upon so many stained consciences,
upon an angry text, upon an open grate,
upon the face shielded behind the mask.

I remember. We must remember... --Rosario Castellano

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